

# Taking the Lead Evaluation



Research specification for an evaluation of sector self-regulation and local accountability and the Local Government Association's offer of support – DRAFT

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## Background

The Local Government Association (LGA) has developed the *Taking the Lead* approach to self-regulation in the local government sector that will help councils and fire and rescue services strengthen their accountability and revolutionise the way they evaluate and improve services. For more information on the *Taking the Lead* approach and our offer to the sector please visit <http://www.local.gov.uk/taking-the-lead>.

The LGA's campaign to reduce the burden of inspection has so far been successful, with the abolition of the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) and use of resources and organisational assessments, as well as the removal of the National Indicator Set as a method of performance management. Alongside this the government has welcomed more emphasis on self-regulation and improvement, as proposed by the sector.

When consulting the sector the LGA discovered that there was overwhelming support for two key principles right at the heart of our proposals:

1. Local authorities are responsible for their own performance and for leading the delivery of improved outcomes for local people in the area.
2. Local authorities are accountable to their local communities. Stronger accountability through greater transparency helps local people drive further improvement.

In addition we have offered councils and fire and rescue services/authorities a number of resources, at no cost, in order to support the sector to take a lead in its own improvement. These are:

- local accountability tools
- peer challenge
- peer support
- Knowledge Hub.
- data and transparency support
- leadership support
- learning and support networks

This document sets out the proposed evaluation of *Taking the Lead* over the next two years and before the next RSG settlement. It will be made up of two parts:

- overall evaluation of the **approach**
- evaluation of the LGA's **offer** of support to the sector.

## Objective of the evaluation

The evaluation will run over a two year period, with the main aim of helping us understand whether, in the context of reduced resources within the sector:

- the *Taking the Lead* approach to sector self-regulation and improvement has the confidence of the sector and the government and, as a result, the trust of the public
- the sector has been able to strengthen local accountability
- the sector is adopting the *Taking the Lead* approach and continues to improve with a reduced burden of inspection, and in the absence of top down performance assessment

- the tools offered to the sector by the LGA have had a positive impact on the sector's capacity to improve itself.

The ongoing evaluation will also allow the LGA to gather feedback and modify our offer accordingly. This will ensure it remains as useful as possible to councils and fire and rescue services/authorities.

It will be important to ensure that the effect of reduced resources in the sector is considered for each element of this evaluation, so that the impact of *Taking the Lead* can be viewed within this context.

## **Evaluation of the Taking the Taking Lead approach**

The evaluation of the LGA's approach to sector self-regulation and improvement will examine:

- the extent to which councils and fire and rescue services/authorities are taking on the task of self-regulation, strengthening local accountability, and the collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole
- whether the sector has the capacity to do this
- whether ministers and senior officials have, and continue to have, confidence in the sector's self-regulation and improvement, and
- whether the public trust in the sector is affected as a result of the self-regulation and improvement approach.

### ***Ministers and senior officials***

We will carry out a perceptions audit of ministers, senior officials and possibly shadow spokespeople, by commissioning depth interviews in three phases to over the course of the evaluation. This will be to determine the level of support and confidence in the sector's ability to self-regulate and improve. This will give us valuable feedback on the direction of the approach, perceptions of whether the sector is achieving self-regulation and improvement, and provide important indicators of whether the approach remains viable.

While we are confident that decision makers currently support the approach, we will be able to gather nuanced information from a range of individuals about possible developments and, in the longer term, whether it is viewed as functioning correctly.

### ***Local authorities***

We have already collected useful information from chief executives, leaders and heads of policy/performance as part of the *Taking the Lead* communications evaluation. We commissioned BMG Research to conduct telephone interviews with 50 of each group in order to inform the communications strategy. This provides us with useful baseline information about awareness of the approach and the support offered by the LGA, and also how they are viewed.

In order to evaluate the extent to which authorities are strengthening local accountability, self-regulation and collective responsibility for the performance of the sector overall, it is necessary to record the level at which they are operating currently. Local authorities currently engage in a number of activities in order to be locally accountable, establish priorities with local people, and drive improvement. For example:

- encouraging feedback
- social media and customer insight techniques
- citizens' juries and participatory budgeting
- consultation on particular proposals

- publishing regular performance information and local accounts (adult social care)
- publishing expenditure online
- using scrutiny to challenge and improve council services
- local performance management
- encouraging challenge by peers
- seeking and welcoming support from the sector.

We will conduct or commission surveys of heads of policy/performance, first to establish at what level the sector is currently using such methods and others in order to strengthen local accountability and drive improvements, and later during the evaluation period to assess whether the sector has maintained or improved levels of inviting public challenge with the help of the LGA and in the absence of government driven inspection.

Alongside this work, we will commission telephone surveys of a sample of chief executives, leaders and chairs of scrutiny to examine perceptions of whether and how the *Taking the Lead* approach is affecting the sector.

### ***Members of the public***

Assessing the impact of the approach on the public will be difficult. This is partly because individuals vary in the extent to which they use and are aware of local government services: in the past, satisfaction with individual services is often high, but overall satisfaction with the council less so. Individuals also vary in their willingness to engage or participate in local decision-making and challenge. However, at the simplest level, it can be argued that *Taking the Lead* is successful if public trust in local government remains the same or improves, despite the replacement of much of the top down performance management and assessments with sector self-regulation and improvement.

We therefore propose to carry out opinion polling of the public to in order to establish whether public trust in local government has been maintained or improved. This is likely to take place regularly over the course of the evaluation.

As part of this polling, and in relation to the extent to which authorities are strengthening local accountability, we will also ask the public about the extent to which they feel they are able to influence decisions.

### ***Data and inspections***

Alongside the surveys to gather opinions, over the course of the two years we will also conduct several exercises to review data (such as performance information previously collected as the National Indicator Set, much of which continues to be gathered by central government) and the results of the continuing inspections which remain for several services. This will allow a more quantitative assessment of the sector performance, that can be considered alongside the opinion information.

### **Evaluation of the LGA's offer of support to the sector**

The various resources offered by the LGA to support self-regulation, improvement and local accountability in the local government sector will each need small separate evaluations. In most cases these have been built into the programmes themselves, and we will bring together the results for this evaluation. Where elements do not currently have evaluations planned, we will work with the relevant programme managers to develop them in an efficient way.

In each case, we will start by establishing a clear view of what would constitute the success of that element, and how that would be measured.

As part of the *Taking the Lead* communications evaluation we have already collected some useful baseline information about elements of the LGA offer, which will be included in the overall evaluation.

### ***Local accountability tools***

Where a peer challenge has identified 'member challenge of performance' as a weakness, the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) will be offering free or subsidised follow-up support. They will also provide wider governance improvement support using the CfPS's Accountability Charter and moderated self-assessment, and help to develop the skills and capacity of local scrutiny chairs and other members to provide effective challenge to performance. This work is referred to as the *Accountability Works for You* (AW4U) framework.

An ongoing evaluation of the programme of support will be built into the AW4U work, with councils revisited at various stages in order to gauge what further support is needed, if any. At these stages outcomes and feedback can be captured.

We already have useful data on awareness about this offer as part of the *Taking the Lead* communications evaluation.

We also provide, in partnership with the London Borough of Redbridge and YouGov, the *YouChoose* budget consultation tool. We will continue to monitor usage data and support its development to ensure it remains relevant to local authorities; and a short survey of users and non-users will also be conducted to give some richer feedback.

### ***Peer challenge and peer support***

The peer support programme team are currently capturing feedback from peer challenges as they are delivered. The team plans to commission a full evaluation of the peer challenge programme over at least 18 months in order to establish whether peer challenges have made an impact, and explore the reasons for authorities who have not made use of the offer. The results of this will feed directly into the overall evaluation.

In addition we will need to capture some of the administrative data around the numbers of peer challenges and work with councils with recent political change.

We already have useful data on awareness about this offer and views about the services provided, as part of the *Taking the Lead* communications evaluation.

### ***Knowledge Hub, data and transparency, learning support and networks***

Baseline work has already been conducted with users and non-users of the Communities of Practice platform, to establish the level of online learning that took place already within local authorities. This covered ways of learning and sharing experience, benchmarking, use of online sources of notable practice, developing notable practice and other forms of learning. Additional information is available on the K-Hub and the prototype version of LG Inform as part of the *Taking the Lead* communications evaluation.

Both K-Hub and LG Inform are still under development and we will continue to monitor progress and ensure they continue to meet the needs of local authorities. This feedback will be included as part of the evaluation. Also, administrative data, such as the number of authorities using these resources, will be recorded and included.

A repeat of the survey with users and non-users is planned for 2012, which will allow an examination of whether there has been any change in the culture of authorities in relation to such issues as

benchmarking, use of online resources, and sharing and learning from other authorities. There will also be the opportunity to seek feedback on the LGA's offer of learning support and networks in this survey. The results of all this work will feed into the overall *Taking the Lead* evaluation.

### **Leadership support**

We already have baseline information on the sector's awareness of this offer and the likelihood of take-up.

The programme team collects administrative data on the number of Leadership Academy places taken up and also feedback from attendees. We will also work with the programme team to incorporate some feedback from those who have not made use of offer.

### **Timescales and deliverables**

The evaluation as a whole will be delivered in three phases. There are many different elements to the programme and these will have to be evaluated to varying degrees of intensity over different timescales.

The evaluation of the *Taking the Lead* **approach** will involve a 'baseline' exercise in late 2011, an interim evaluation by the end of 2012 and a final evaluation in late 2013. The length of the evaluation is to ensure we have a complete picture of any changes in local government over time.

The evaluation of the elements of the LGA's **offer** to support the sector will take place at various points during that time.

The outputs of the project will be as follows:

- 'baseline' report – covering perceptions audit of ministers and senior officials, baseline surveys of local authorities, and public opinion polling (available early 2012)
- report for each element of the LGA **offer**, as described above (as and when completed in 2011 and 2012 – these will be detailed, and also be used to provide information to the programme managers to inform developments to their programme, but the key lessons from them will feed into the 'interim' and 'final' reports)
- 'interim' report – covering 'one year on' perceptions audit of ministers and senior officials, surveys of local authorities, and public opinion polling; plus results of any LGA **offer** evaluations available at that time (available early 2013)
- 'final' report – covering 'final' perceptions audit of ministers and senior officials, surveys of local authorities, and public opinion polling; plus results of all LGA **offer** evaluations (available end 2013)

<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Phase 3</b>
<b>Reporting early 2012</b>	<b>Reporting early 2013</b>	<b>Reporting December 2013</b>
Baseline report	Interim report	Final report
Individual reports of elements of the LGA <b>offer</b>		

## Contact the LGA

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